Toyo S. Kawakami
30 Orchard Lane
Columbus, Ohio 43214

DISTORTED IMAGES

As I stand here before you, what do you see, and what are your thoughts? Your eyes tell you: She is anAsian (so I am, of Japanese descent), old (yes, I admit to being 73), and rather small (despite all my wishing and praying that I could, one day, reach five feet!) You may be wondering: What is she like, otherwise? How does she relate to us as a person? In your mind, you have probably made a judgment, depending on your perception, your view of cultural differences, your tolerance for someone who appears foreign.

The Orientals in this country speak of themselves as Asian Americans, but the term "Asian American" includes varied national backgrounds: the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, the Pacific Islanders, and East Indian. And these very groups do not have the same culture, history, philosophy, language, or appearance, so they are multi-ethnic among themselves. Yet they are bound together by the fact of their being nonwhite and a minority population in this vast country.

Being a divergent ethnic group, the Asians have been an easy mark for stereotyping, which is still practiced by members of the white majority. In social interaction, we tend to categorize, using certain words or catch-phrases, to express a concept or belief, and to generalize. This tendency has profound impact on racial prejudice and stereotyping. Stereotypes are distorted images. They are oversimplified, fixed and erroneous concepts. They are resistant to change, despite contrary, contradictory, truthful evidence, simply because they have become a part of one's belief system.

For example, years ago, when I was living in Cincinnati, a salesman came to my door. He was a white man, neatly attired, with his briefcase and samples. As soon as he saw me, he proceeded to give his sales pitch in pidgin English, "You likee me sell you this stuff? Good for inside house; not use outside yard." I was

amazed, as I listened in silence. He continued in this vein for a few more minutes, and then asked, "You likee buy?" I replied, "I am sorry, sir, but I am not at all interested in your product, and have absolutely no use for it." He stared at me, as he slowly said, "You speak perfect English." I said, "I should, since I was born in this country and am a college graduate." His face began to turn a rosy color, as he muttered, "Why didn't you say so?" and he hurried away as fast as he could.

This incident sheds light on how Asians are sometimes perceived, ignorant, unable to cope with the English language. But this is not the only one, nor the first, and most likelyy not the last. For decades, the concept of the unassimilated Asian was prevalent on the West Coast and became one of the arguments for the removal of the Japanese people from the Pacific states into concentration camps during World War II.

The distorted images of the Orientals have a long history. The United States, as you well know, has attracted for many years people of different nationalities, and I am sure that among you yourselves there is a blend of European origins. The Pacific Coast drew towards its shores Asiatic immigrants, just as the Atlantic Coast received immigrants from Europe. They came with hope and faith in the American dream.

Ever since their arrival, the Asians, as a racially distinct, culturally different immigrant group, posed a unique problem to the social and racial order of American society, especially on the West Coast, where they settled in great numbers. What has happened to many Asian Americans has exemplified some of the worst aspects of American institutional racism, such as exclusion, isolation, concentration camps, massacre. In more concrete terms, problems related to employment, immigration, education, health and other needs have been suffered by the Asian Americans. These generalities are made more poignant and specific by what I have seen,

heard, read, and experienced.

For the Orientals, their role in this country began ten years before the American Civil War, with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California and the coming of Asian immigrants to the West Coast. Among them were large numbers of the Chinese who came as contract laborers, enduring hard labor, servitude and hostility from the very beginning. The Chinese contributed greatly to California's economic development through their labor in the mines, in agriculture, and on the railroads. California was then the western frontier with a strong need to grow. Perhaps, the greatest Chinese achievement was their work between 1865 and 1869 on the Central Pacific link of the transcontinental railroad. Without their manpower, which numbered some 12,000 workers, the railroad that opened up extensive territory and wealth of the West to national development would not have been possible.

Shortly after the first Chinese immigrated to California, an anti-Chinese movement began to gather momentum. A crucial blow was struck in 1854, when the California Supreme Court established limits for Chinese participation in community affairs. California law of the period forbade Native Americans, the Indians, from testifying for or against a white man, and in one murder case, where the Chinese houseboy was the sole witness, the Court ruled that "Chinese were Indians" and therefore ineligible to testify. Statutory provisions like this resulted in untold arbitrary cruelties against Chinese people in the state. Their presence raised complex economic, cultural and political questions which eventually resulted in the federal Exclusion Act of 1882 which prohibited further immigration of the Chinese to the United States.

Japanese immigration began in 1890, and the Japanese immigrants first settled in Hawaii to work on the sugar and pineapple plantations. Then they began coming to the West Coast as agricultural laborers, and settled in Oregon, Washington and California, with the greatest concentration in California. But they were not welcome on the mainland and soon became the target of anti-Oriental discrimination.

This anti-Oriental hostility was not new, but a carry-over from the earlier years of feelings against the Chinese.

Whether they came by way of Hawaii or directly from their homeland, the Japanese started life in this country at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. The Issei, the first generation (I am Nisei, second generation) were ineligible for citizenship. Many of them came from the farm areas of southern Japan. They were not content to continue working as poorly paid migrant field hands, so after saving enough money, they would purchase a few acres, usually land considered worthless and not fit for farming, and they converted these wastelands into the most productive areas in the West. Seen as competitors, white ranchers started a propaganda campaign against them and eventually had alien land laws passed which prevented the Japanese from purchasing or leasing land in California. Nine other states then adopted similar laws. One of the spurious reasons given by the white landowners was that the Japanese farmers took everything out of the land and put nothing back, as part of the stereotyping process. Why did they then not take over the formerly infertile land themselves in the first place and transform the countryside into profit-bearing crops? As it was, at the time of our evacuation, the state undertook escheat proceedings to take the enriched farms from the Japanese farmers.

The state of California, where I was born and grew up, was the hotbed of anti-Orientalism from the mid-nineteenth century on, where stereotyping became common and hateful. As a child, I lived in Sacramento, the capital city, where a large section towards the river (because of restrictive housing) was almost completely Japanese. But here also lived some Chinese, Mexicans, Blacks, a few Italians and Austrians. As children playing together, visiting in each other's homes, going to the same school, I did not pay much attention to racial differences. True, we had our neighborhood squabbles, and I would be called "a yellow Jap", but I retorted in kind, I am sure. This appellation years later carried a bitter, sharp sting when applied to all the Japanese.

One has only to turn to the media, literature, movies, cartoons, and comic books to realize how the stereotyping of the Asians was perpetrated, and perpetuated over the years. The movies and television still present Asians as stereotypes created in the early 1900's. They are generally portrayed as waiters, laundrymen, cooks, villains, warmongers, Geishas, house servants, gardeners, karate experts, and prostitutes. The movies and television have failed to reflect the achievements of Asian Americans in education, medicine, finance, art, music, or any other equivalent field.

When a script calls for an Asian, it is to provide a backdrop or "an Oriental feeling" to the main story. Television's Hawaii Five-O is one. The heroes are white men, the head of the police department and his assistant, imported from the mainland to solve the crimes. After them come the Asians, one a Chinaman stereotype, and the other a Hawaiian stereotype. The bad guys get bigger roles, indicating that the writers of the show find it easier to depict the Asians as villains than as heroes. One of the villains is a bald-headed mustached Chinese Communist master spy, a cruel and vicious stereotype, presented in this fashion so the audience can say, "All communist Asians are born that way." He seems to be based on the character of theAsian villain in the Fu Manchu films.

As written about in the story, The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu by Sax Rohmer, Fu Manchu, played in the film by Warner Oland, a Swede, was a kindly, scientific, ordinary man without diabolical intentions.Then, during a revolutionary riot in China, a British officer kills his wife and child. Fu Manchu follows him to London and takes revenge on all his family bu using black magic, scientific inventions, and Oriental slyness. Advertisements and reviews of the movie referred to "the slant-eyed villain". The theme of Asiatic dominance played upon the idea of "yellow peril"as popularized in pulp magazines, cheap novels, and by the Hearst press. This treatment of Asians was widely accepted and popular, as evinced in the sequels published from 1931 through 1967. Fu Manchu was a radio show in the thirties, and the fourteen Sax

Rohmer novels which first appeared in 1911 were serialized in Collier's Magazine in 1957.

This hideous characterization influenced the Asian immigration exclusion, encouraged the evacuation and internment of the Japanese, and paved the way for World War II's anti-Japanese propaganda films. Not only villainy, but the topic of miscegenation was exploed in the films. Though the Hays Office lost its influence in the late forties, the "miscegenation is forbidden" taboo remained for many years and still is in effect for Asian men. While the Hays Office recognized the film as an art form and as an influence on the morals and sexual behavior of of the whites, it ignored the devastating effect upon all the minority races. While white men have broken the miscegenation taboo with Asian women, Asian men are still where they were in 1900. Leading male Asian roles are almost always played by white men in yellow face. The implication is that Asian men are inferior to white men.

It is interesting to note that one of the most popular detectives in movie history was originally with the Honolulu police. Charlie Chan, the Chinese master detective, was featured in twenty-two movies in the thirties and twenty-four in the forties. In this star role, Charlie Chan was never played by an Asian, but by a white man in Oriental makeup. Audiences accepted the idea that white men could play Asians, if the role was important and the character sympathetic. Other roles which demean the Asian are the karate expert, the Polynesian beauty, the gardener or farmer, and the Chinese Communist.

These more recent stereotypes are not obviously evil characterizations, but still insidious in their portrayals. They cause Asians to be thought of as certain types or caricatures, rather than as actual human beings. They are created, like robots, to move and act in definite predictable styles. So the ordinary viewer accepts the stereotypes on the screen, because he thinks that "the camera never lies".

In 1970, Frank Chin, a Chinese American writer and dramatist, reviewed

some films produced from the 1930's through the 1960's that contained racial stereotypes. He sarcastically referred to them as "the products of ignorant nincompoops". The films mentioned by Chin covered stories about the Blacks, the American Indians, the Mexicans, the Chinese, Filippinos, and Japanese. His comments, though humorously worded, are b itingly caustic.

Though much has been said about racism in the established media, there has been as much in comic books, though less sophisticated and more blatant. Comic books sell easily and reach a wide audience, surpassing the circulation of most popular magazines. Some say that comics are a mirror to our collective unconscious. If so, then the American unconsciousness has progressed little beyond the Fu Manchu fantasy. Witness Spiderman, Green Lantern, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. Since an Asian can never soar into the air and perform heroic feats, the best he can do is to offer comic relief. The best known Asian sidekick in comicdom was Chop Chop, an apprentice to the legendary blackhawks, a multinational paramilitary force. Bucktoothed, pigtailed, stunted, and pear-shaped, Chop Chop would hurl himself into battle, endearing himself to the reader with memorable one-liners like "Me kill!" Chop Chop was given a definite, albeit retarded, personality. A more subdued version of Chop Chop is Pie Face, an Alaskan grease monkey who is an all-purpose servant to the Green Lantern.

War comics provided the clearest example of how the media use racism to foster patriotism. Whether they are Germans, Japanese or North Koreans, the enemy soldier is caricatured as cruel and deformed. The bespectacled,squinty-eyed, bucktoothed Japanese soldier is a staple of most war comics. Stories depicting the Vietnam War, however, were less successful, possibly because of the complexity and lack of glamor in a people's war.

If Asian men are portrayed as retarded, sadistic, or bucktoothed, then Asian women are slinky, exotic, with a penchant for white men. An example is Suzy Wong, another is the Dragon Lady in the world of Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates.

The stereotypes as shown in the comics are caricatures of the Asians, but the unfortunate thing is that so much of American views on Asians are subtly influenced.

Caricatures of Asians have been part of American popular culture for generations. As we have seen, the power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy detective who talks about Confucius are all part of the standard American image of the Asian. Anglo-American writers of some literary merit have used these popular stereotypes, although usually not as a focus for their work. Chinese caricatures can be found in the pages of Bret Harte, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Frank Norris, and other writers about the American West. But, for the most part, much of Anglo-American literature containing these caricatures were published in pulp novel and dime romances. Many of these lesser works, though popular in their day and now almost forgotten, contributed to national attitudes towards Asians. Collier's Weekly staff writer Wallace Irwin, creator of Hashimura Togo, the "Japanese" schoolboy whose "diaries" were serialized for the first twenty years in various magazines and syndicates of this century, was widely believed to be Japanese, or at least an authority on the Japanese.

Anglo-American literature does not tell us about Asians, It tells about Anglos' opinion of themselves, in relation to their opinions of Asians. It illustrates how racism impacts on culture. In reality, racist stereotypes have hindered the Western writer in his abilty to understand and interpret the Asian. Stereotypes of racial minorities are a record of prejudices; they are part of an attempt to justify various attitudes and practices. They served to provide for the myths of white supremacy. However, a clear understanding of the stereotypes and their role in perpetuating illusions can lead to to the positive process of changing the distorted images.

It is not for white authors to define Asian humanity, but rather to confront aspects of their own humanity. For Asian American writers now being recognized, their task is to contribute to the identity of America by defining themselves.